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ABSTRACT

Designed to help instructors become aware of factors that may interfere with teaching composition to Mexican-American students, this paper surveys research findings about attitudes toward Spanish-speaking persons in the United States and about language patterns and attitudes of Mexican Americans. It then briefly recommends techniques for working with Mexican-American students and suggests possibilities for future research in this area. The paper stresses that composition instructors need to acquire multicultural teaching strategies if members of minority cultures are to be given a reasonable chance of succeeding at the university level. (GW)

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Awareness of Multicultural Language and Learning Styles Research: An Urging

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (28th, Kansas City, Missouri, March 31-April 2, 1977)

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That some Mexican American students or other minority students do so well in our freshman composition courses while others seem inherently doomed to failure has to concern us. Freshman composition instructors, all too often Ph.D. candidates immersed in literary study that, regardless of value, demands more of their time than learning how to teach composition, need to acquire multicultural teaching strategies if members of minority cultures are to be given a reasonable chance to succeed at the university level.

By examining that research into the language and learning styles of American students, composition instructors become aware of considerations for successfully teaching freshman composition to them and to other minority groups. Both research and observation indicate that no single culture of Mexican Americans exists and that Mexican American attitudes toward language and education vary substantially based upon the geographic, economic, and educational experiences of the students. Knowing these variable factors can, hopefully, enable freshman composition instructors to teach their students more effectively. For that reason, this paper samples research about the attitudes toward and of speakers of Spanish in the United States and the influence of Spanish upon English language production, recommends actions for those who teach composition to Mexican Americans, and suggests additional research on teaching composition to them. For a broader overview of language variety research, Jenefer M. Giannasi's "Dialects and Composition" in Teaching Composition: 10 Bibliographic Essays[1] will direct the reader to key sources.

As in so many other aspects of life, in the composition class, preconceptions about the abilities of Mexican American students have little place. A possible prejudicial attitude toward the spoken language varieties constitutes perhaps the greatest obstacle for the freshman composition instructor to overcome when

working with minority culture students. Allan Metcalf determined that employers in California, when asked to rate the language abilities of prospective employees, considered those speakers with the greatest perceived accent to have the least command of the English language, even though those speakers were equally fluent in English.[2] Can this prejudicial reaction occur in freshman English? Certainly. Even though courses in sociolinguistics have been designed to help prospective teachers overcome such reflexive attitudes, Gary Underwood found that secondary education majors trained in sociolinguistics continued to evaluate speakers they heard to tape according to their perceptions of accent.[3] Apparently the attitudes one grows up with cannot be conveniently overcome by exposure to a few linguistic courses. As an indication that such attitudes become more fixed with age, Alice Brekke determined that adolescents, listening to aural tapes, distinguished Mexican American from Anglo American language varieties more readily than did pre-adolescents and that Mexican American adolescents perceived Mexican American speakers as, among other things, happier and handsomer than Anglo American speakers.[4] Such culturally based judgments seem natural to humans. At the very least, instructors should become aware of their own judgments. Increased exposure to language varieties may break those judgments down even if classes intended to accomplish that do not.

Next to avoiding prejudgments of language varieties, composition teachers should not prejudge their students based upon their apparent ethnic affiliations. Because a person is Spanish-surnamed does not mean that the person speaks Spanish fluently or, in fact, at all. The teenagers that William Kuvlesky studied in rural areas near Laredo, Texas, spoke more Spanish closer to home than nearer to school classrooms. Teenagers in rural southern Colorado spoke even less Spanish, perhaps because fewer Mexican immigrants settled there than in Laredo.[5] R. L. Skrabanek and Mary Mahoney found that most people they surveyed in two rural south

Texas counties and San Antonio preferred to speak Spanish.[6] Their findings contrasted with those of Roger Thompson, who, in studying immigrants from rural Texas to Austin, determined that Spanish was being spoken less in that urban environment than had previously been supposed.[7] Apparently, whether a speaker used Spanish or not was determined by the location of that person's childhood. Those who were raised in urban Austin were less likely to speak Spanish than those who were raised in rural areas. Thompson also found that the existence of a non-standard accent correlated with the perceived way to advancement: if education was perceived as the route to advancement, then northern Anglo accents were adopted. If assimilation to regional norms was perceived as the route to advancement, then Texas speech patterns were adopted. In their sociological study of Mexican Americans in Los Angeles and San Antonio, Leo Grebler, Joan Moore, and Ralph Guzman found more monolingual Spanish speakers in poor barrios than in wealthier communities and concluded that upward mobility led to the decline in loyalty to Spanish.[8] These findings paralleled those of Fernando Peñalosa and Edward McDonagh, who discoverd that in Pomona, California, upward mobility led to diminished use of Spanish, but not of strong ethnic orientations.[9] Victoria Patella studied sophomores at Texas A & M University in an attempt to determine what factors influenced the preference for speaking Spanish or English. She determined that if their parents were born in Mexico, the students' preference for speaking Spanish remained great; that males who prefer large families and whose mothers do not work prefer Spanish; and that females who intended not to work after graduating preferred Spanish.[10] Generally, the researchers maintain, the more traditional the cultural values, the greater the desire to speak Spanish. Patella noted, however, that whether or not a student speaks Spanish does not determine the student's ethnic identification. Patella and Kuvlesky, in a joint study of the use of Spanish by bilingual males and females, concluded that females

speak more English than males do, but that females are not necessarily more fluent in English than males.[11] Patella and Kuvlesky speculate that males may be more selective in their use of English and that females, trained for obedience rather than independent thinking, may follow the English speaking model of their teachers more readily than males do. But even these findings may not apply to urban centers, to students raised in upwardly mobile homes, and to individuals who have either found more pride in emphasizing their Hispanic heritage, or who have chosen to reject their heritage. Being aware of how Mexican American students may refer to themselves may tell much about their attitudes toward themselves, their native language, and the Anglo American school system through which they have had to come. In lieu of acquiring personal experience with the students themselves, a highly recommended but often impractical step, reading for background in such articles as Richard L. Nostrand's diachronic study[12] of the emergence of the term "Chicano," will help freshman composition instructors become a bit more aware of their students' differences. While mixed, research findings such as those indicated above emphasize the need for freshman composition instructors to learn about the individual backgrounds of their Mexican American students before concluding anything about their preferences for either English or Spanish and their possible fluency in either language.

The research into Mexican American's ability to use English and the influence of Spanish upon that ability provides more consistent findings than the research into language dominance. After studying high school students, Ricardo Garcia concluded that any restricted language code is related to lower socioeconomic level bilinguals, but not to all bilinguals.[13] However, as researchers such as Labov have indicated,[14] the questionable belief in a restricted language code among lower socioeconomic classes causes false assumptions about the language abilities of students from these classes. As for the influence of Spanish upon

English, Lastra de Suarez, in studying a number of English varieties on the east side of Los Angeles, found that the varieties were related to the particular peer group of the speaker, not to language dominance. The non-standard English elements related closely to the non-standard speech of the subjects' monolingual English-speaking peers.[15] These findings parallel those of Caroline Corser Willard, who, after examining college placement exams at Austin, Texas, determined that barrio English interfered with standard English regardless of the language dominance of the speaker.[16] She reported that mistakes in English were similar to those made by anyone learning English as a second language regardless of their native language. The English deviations of Mexican Americans most commonly occurred in the use of verb auziliaries other than be, confusions or prepositions, and some word choices. Willard explained that the difficulty with verbal suffixes may relate to the difficulty Spanish speakers have in pronouncing terminal consonant clusters. At the University of Texas at El Paso, Tommy Teel compiled the following common non-standard phenonema in the compositions of Mexican American Spanish speakers: the omission of articles or their inclusion when not needed, the omission of pluralization markers, the omission of the -ed marker in simple past tense regular forms, the confusion of prepositions (particularly in and on), and some confusion in semantically close terms, such as win and beat or say and tell, elements which occur in other non-standard English varieties.[17] In a study of fourth and ninth grade students in northern New Mexico, Rodrigues also found the common confusion Spanish-speaking bilinguals have in using prepositions (and, incidentally, common spelling confusions such as this for these and the for they). More importantly, he discovered that bilinguals who had experienced bilingual education actually produced more transformations in their speech and writing than monclingual English-speaking students in other parts of the country.[18] We can conclude, generally, that speaking

Spanish does not interfere with English language production any more than does speaking any non-standard variety of English and, in proper educational conditions, may actually be helpful to the student.

While this recounting of language research indicates some awarenesses which freshman composition instructors should have, it needs to consider culturally-determined learning styles, in which may have even greater influence upon experiences in composition classes.[19] Although most universities cater to Anglo American field-independent learning styles, Mexican Americans who come from traditional homes may be field-dependent learners, relying more upon the strong support and direction of the instructor than Anglo American students do.[20] After training in alternative instructional strategies, freshman composition instructors can adapt their strategies to the learning styles of their students. For instance, if some students are less competitive than their university peers, is it wrong to allow them to work on composition assignments together? In their mutual support, they may learn more than one student can by struggling independently. Certainly, workshop approaches have already provided the basis for such a practice. And professors themselves seem to profit from joint publishing ventures. Why, then, should all students be compelled to work alone?

An uncomplicated technique to help instructors determine the learning styles of their students is the use of the reading interest and/or biographical inventory. By studying the results of those instruments, instructors can determine something of the language interference the students exhibit, but, more importantly, responses which reflect the experiential backgrounds of the students and their culturally-determined learning styles. In contrast to this relatively simple procedure, using standardized tests to interpret student abilities should proceed cautiously, if at all, for the tests may be culturally biased and at best have a low correlation with long range success in college. As many composition instructors

have discovered, some students are test-shy, psychologically unable to take and pass tests, yet, allowed to work at an unpressured pace, perfectly able to communicate well.

If bidialectal training occurs at all, it should only be at the request of the student, not as a requisite for passing freshman composition. Since accent is not a clear indicator of English fluency, the instructor could do more harm than good by imposing oral language changes upon the student. And since the only variety of English we can point to as "standard" with reasonable assurance is written English, concentration upon changing accents wastes class time.

Before universities can develop freshman composition programs which provide the best possible instruction for Mexican American students, much research remains to be completed. For example, do topic selections for certain papers determine the ease or difficulty which Mexican Americans experience in attempting those papers? Does greater or less structure produce better writing: in assignments, in-class instruction, paper formats? What, if anything, distinguishes urban Mexican American students from rural Mexican American students? Why do some Mexican American students fail in college while others succeed?

And now, for a realistic final suggestion: Joan Rubin asked the question, "What can good language learners teach us?" She found that good language learners were good guessers, were willing to appear foolish, experimented by making up new sentences, had a strong desire to communicate, practiced often, monitored their own and the speech of others, and attended to meaning.[21] Those characteristics may be profitable to develop in our freshman composition students, but, required indiscriminately, may conflict with the learning styles of some minority students, and consequently defeat them rather than help them. It is, nevertheless, Rubin's question which should be our model. Freshman composition instructors must observe their minority students more and continually ask, "What Can They Teach Us?"

FOOTNOTES

1. Jenefer M. Giannasi, "Dialects and Composition," in Teaching Composition: 10 Bibliographical Essays, ed. Gary Tate. Fort Worth, Texas: Texas Christian University Press, 1976. pp.

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4. Alice M. Brekke, "Evaluation Reactions of Adolescent and Pre-adolescent Mexican-American and Anglo American Students to Selected Samples of Spoken English." Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, 1973.

5. William P. Kublesky, "Use of Spanish and Aspirations for Social Mobility Among Chicanos: A Synthesis and Evaluation of Texas and Colorado Findings." Paper presented at the Rocky Mountain Social Science Association Meeting, Sociology Section, Laramie, Wyoming, April, 1973.

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10. Victoria M. Patella, "A Study in the Validity of Language Usage as an Indicator of Ethnic Identification." Thesis, Texas A & M University, 1971.

11. Victoria M. Patella and William P. Kuvlesky, "Situational Variations in Language Patterns of Mexican-American Boys and Girls." Social Science Quarterly, 53, 1973, pp. 855-864.

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13. Ricardo L. Garcia, "Identification and Comparison of Oral English Syntactic Patterns of Spanish-English Speaking Adolescent Hispanos." Dissertation, University of Denver, 1973.

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15. Yolanda Lastra de Suarez, "El Habla y la Educacion de los Ninos de Origen Mexicano en Los Angeles." In Educardo Hernandez-Chavez, Andrew D. Cohen, and Anthony F. Beltramo (eds.), El Lenguaje de los Chicanos: Regional and Social Characteristics of Language Used by Mexican Americans. Arlington, Va.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1975, pp. 61-69.

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17. Tommy Lou Teel, "A Sociolinguistic Study of Spanish Linguistic Interference and Nonstandard Grammatical Phenomena in the Written English of Selected Mexican-American Bilinguals." Thesis, University of Texas at El Paso, 1971.

18. Raymond J. Rodriques, "A Comparison of the Written and Oral English Syntax of Mexican American Bilingual and Anglo American Monolingual Fourth and Ninth Grade Students (Las Vegas, New Mexico)." Disseration, University of New Mexico, 1974.

19. See e.g., Malcolm Garber, Classroom Strategies: Culture and Learning Styles. Vol. 1. Albuquerque, N.M.: SCEL, 1968.

20. Manuel Ramirez III and Carlos Castañeda, Cultural Democracy, Bicognitive Development, and Education. New York: Academic Press, 1974.

21. Joan Rubin, "What the Good Language Learner Can Teach Us." TESOL Quarterly, 9, No. 1, 1975, pp. 41-51.